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Pg. 23

Building a partnership with Russia

By William J. Perry

With the break-up of the Soviet Empire and the Warsaw Pact, the United States must forge new security relationships with this region, especially with Russia.

America has four fundamental national security interests in Russia: guaranteeing the safety of the enormous Cold War nuclear arsenal; preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; maintaining regional stability in the former Warsaw Pact region; and avoiding a renewed antagonistic global rivalry with Russia.

Our challenge is to build a new, pragmatic partnership with a nuclear superpower undergoing revolutionary change. The U.S. can meet this challenge if we stick to a policy based on realism and pragmatism, one that involves a realistic assessment of Russia's future and the pursuit of policies flexible enough to respond effectively to different possible outcomes to the great turbulence going on in Russia.

We need to understand that even with the best outcome imaginable—a fully democratic and market-oriented Russia—that nation still will have interests different from ours. And a worst-case scenario is possible: Russia could emerge from its turbulence as an authoritarian, militaristic, imperialistic nation hostile to the West.

We owe it to ourselves and our children to do all we can to influence a positive outcome. But because we cannot control this, we must also have a strategy that hedges against a negative outcome. Our policies and our strategies have both these two elements.

Most important are our efforts to dismantle and dispose of the 25,000 former Soviet nuclear weapons in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus. For example, with America's help, nuclear warheads are being removed right now from the SS-19 and SS-24 ICBMs in Ukraine. They are being shipped back to Russia to be dismantled and eliminated. Reducing the nuclear threat does not get any more direct and any more immediate than that.

We have other cooperative programs with Russia and the other former Soviet states that are in America's interest, whether or not reform succeeds.

For instance, we're working with Russia to halt proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Bringing Russia and the new states into a strengthened non-proliferation regime will enhance the security of the entire world.

We're deepening contacts at every level between the militaries of both countries as part of an effort

to decrease suspicion and increase mutual understanding.

We're also helping Russia convert some of its defense production facilities, particularly nuclear facilities, to the production of civilian goods.

Another key program is the Partnership for Peace, which offers Central and Eastern Europe states—including the former Soviet states—a vehicle for building a security relationship with NATO. Partnership for Peace will help us achieve two very important interests we have in Russia: discouraging a revival of Russian imperialism and avoiding a renewed global rivalry with Russia.

However, we also have a hedge strategy should things go badly in Russia. For example, while the United States is already implementing the START I nuclear weapons force reductions, we will not begin the further START II reductions until Russia undertakes comparable reductions.

And the most important part of the hedge strategy is built into our defense program. We are going to maintain strong, ready armed forces and the defense capabilities we need in case future threats emerge in Russia.

Right now critics are saying that we have chosen to make Russia a partner when, in fact, it's still our primary rival. That is a false dichotomy. Russia can be both our partner and our rival, and both at the same time.

Even friendly major powers have interests that sometimes conflict. We cannot expect Russia or any other great power to do things inconsistent with its own national interest. But we can expect Russia to recognize the benefits of being a responsible member of the world community. We can expect that disagreements be peacefully resolved and not be allowed to spill over into the broader relationship. These are our expectations for relations with all major powers, and should be the standard for American-Russian relations as well.

In the meantime, our policies are based on realism—real facts, real interests, real priorities and real expectations. It's a pragmatic approach that on the one hand works to assist Russia in areas beneficial to both of our countries, but, on the other hand, protects us from possible negative outcomes.

No one ever said building this new relationship would be easy, but we owe it to ourselves to try as hard as we can—to shape the future rather than be shaped by it.

William J. Perry is U.S. secretary of defense.